Administrator Speeches 2009

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Access to the Region’s Core Groundbreaking

06-08-09

Remarks for Peter M. Rogoff, Administrator, Federal Transit Administration
Access to the Region's Core Groundbreaking
Newark, N.J.

On behalf of President Obama and Transportation Secretary LaHood, I'm delighted to be here today to celebrate a historic breakthrough for one of the nation's most important public works projects – Access to the Region's Core.

On behalf of President Obama, I'm here to announce our intention to sign an Early Systems Work Agreement of 1.35 billion dollars -- the largest agreement ever for a project at this phase.

This agreement includes Federal and local funds from a great many sources, including the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

My announcement today is the precursor to the Obama Administration's plan to sign a Full Funding Grant Agreement for this project.

That agreement will provide a full $3.0 billion in FTA discretionary funds to help complete this landmark project.

That's the largest commitment made to any transit project anywhere in the history of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

It's most appropriate that the Obama Administration makes this historical commitment here in New Jersey. It's not just because New Jersey is the most transit-intensive state in the nation. It is because of the leadership that has been demonstrated by Governor Corzine, NJ TRANSIT, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and the entire New Jersey delegation, in making this project a reality.

These are the projects that transform people’s lives.

These are the bold projects that, in the past, were either

- debated to death or
- simply ignored.

Thankfully, as a result of Governor Corzine’s leadership and President Obama’s vision for recovery, this groundbreaking signals the start of a new era.

President Obama and Governor Corzine represent a different partnership from the past.

Today’s groundbreaking demonstrates that this President and this Governor will not allow Washington and Trenton to just sit on the sidelines while

- our congestion gets worse,
- our commutes get longer,
- our air gets dirtier; and
- our planet gets warmer.

Today's groundbreaking is one of many events where we, as a nation, demonstrate our ability to move from "Yes we can" to "Yes we will."

This project truly will transform people's lives.

It will transform the lives of thousands of unemployed construction workers and their families as they get called back to work for the long haul.

This is what President Obama means by recovery. It means putting people back to work now, to improve the lives of so many others for years to come.

This project will transform the lives of millions of commuters over the next several decades as their commute gets significantly shorter.

This project will take roughly 40 minutes off the average round trip commute for the people of New Jersey and parts of New York.

What does an extra 40 minutes mean for those families?

- It means the opportunity to see your spouse or your kids before leaving for work.
- It means the opportunity to spend time with your kids before they have to go to bed.
- It means the opportunity to have breakfast or dinner together as a family.
- It means the opportunity to make sure homework is getting done.
- It means actually having a chance to get laundry done, or get to the store, or to look in on an aging relative.
- An extra 40 minutes means having the time to "have a life" -- even during a hectic work week.

And this project truly is of historic significance.

[As has already been pointed out] It has been roughly one hundred years since the last rail tunnel under the Hudson was opened.

On November 27, 1910, the Pennsylvania Railroad sent its first train through that tunnel from Penn Station to Perth Amboy.

To give everyone some context, that very same month,

- the Wright Brothers demonstrated that you can use an airplane to transport cargo. That historic flight went all the way from Dayton, Ohio to Columbus, Ohio.
- That same month, the Mexican Revolution began.
- The President was William Howard Taft. The Governor of New Jersey was John Franklin Fort.
- And, yes, back then, one of New Jersey's U.S. Senators was named "Frank."
- His full name was Frank Obadiah Briggs.

Since that time – since November of 1910 --

- the population of New Jersey has more than quadrupled.
- The population of New York City has almost tripled.

Yet this same tunnel has been required to accommodate each and every Amtrak and NJ Transit train crossing under the Hudson.

A new tunnel has been talked about for 80 years.

So, put simply, this event is many decades overdue. Finally… today… through the leadership of President Obama, Jon Corzine and the New Jersey Congressional delegation, we are now ready to make history again.

With today's event, we break ground on a project to immediately double rail capacity under the Hudson.

And, I thank the Governor for his earlier statement committing to keep the project on time and within budget.

Needless to say, these two leaders could not have made this happen without the aggressive support of the State's Congressional delegation.

Frank Lautenberg has been champion of transit and rail improvements for his entire public life -- whether its:

- Keeping Amtrak alive during hostile Administrations, or building
- the Hudson-Bergen line, or
- Lautenberg station, or
- the full electrification of the Northeast Corridor.

For ten years, I had the privilege of being his staff guy on the Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee. Today, as Federal Transit Administrator, I'm thrilled to be back as his teammate.

Senator Bob Menendez has also been a fierce advocate for New Jersey's commuters. Now, just this year, Senator Menendez has risen to the role of Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee that will rewrite our transit laws for the next six years.

Together, I look forward to working with him to craft a Federal transit plan that will bring the successes of New Jersey to the rest of the country.

This New Jersey Congressional delegation is a formidable team like no other.

It is this team that has allowed us to make history today.

I conclude by just repeating that President Obama, Secretary LaHood, and I couldn't be more pleased that the Federal Transit Administration will be a full partner in this history-making project.

So, on behalf of the President and the Secretary, I want to thank everyone who made this day possible.

Thank you.

Administrator Rogoff Delivers Remarks Transpo Groundbreaking Event

07-01-09

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to this event. It's a pleasure to be here today along with Chairman Lewis, Senator Bayh, Mayor Luecke, Mayor Rea, and honored guests.

On behalf of President Obama and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, I want to congratulate the cities of South Bend and Mishawaka and the entire TRANSPO leadership, for their drive and vision in bringing us to this historic day.

It is indeed an historic day, not just for St. Joseph County but for the entire country. It's an historic day for our efforts to clean up our environment. It's an historic day in our efforts to put people back to work and revive our economy.

This project that we are breaking ground on this morning has been talked about for years and years. For years, TRANSPO has been piecing together several different Federal and State grants to make this project a reality. Some of those grants have come from the very hard work of Senator Bayh. Others have come through our Federal transit formula funds.

The culminating event that put this project over the goal line was the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act). With the additional $3.7 million that the Recovery Act provided, we moved this project from a series of dreams and drawings to a contract that is going to immediately put hundreds of citizens from this community back to work.

That means hundreds of families in this region that will once again have a steady paycheck…and the stability that comes with a steady paycheck. This is precisely the kind of investment that President Obama envisioned when he championed the Recovery Act.

These are investments where the dollars are invested right here at home. These are investments where every taxpayer dollar is spent right here in the United States. These are investments that improve the lives of regular folks – folks that need a job, folks that ride the bus.

These are investments that go even farther by improving our environment and giving us a cleaner place to raise our children.
I have to say that when I read that this facility was going to be built to the LEED platinum standard, I did not believe it. I read it again. And then I read it a third time. This is no small feat. It is more than a special accomplishment for TRANSPO. It is an accomplishment for the entire nation.

This is something that transit agencies in places like New York or Atlanta or Los Angeles have considered. But they then abandoned the idea and have settled for just the gold standard or the silver standard. Achieving the platinum standard was just too hard – it was just too much effort. That may be true for New York or Los Angeles, but not for South Bend.

This is going to be a bus facility. It's going to be more than just an office building. It is going to be a place where we maintain buses and wash buses. This is not a facility that easily lends itself to design standards that improve our environment.

But South Bend has taken up the challenge and shown us that it can be done. When I read that South Bend was actually going to build a bus maintenance facility to the LEED platinum standard, I was floored. I said that those folks in South Bend aren't just hugging the trees; they are hugging them so tightly that they are chewing on the bark.

So, as the Federal Transit Administrator, on behalf of the entire nation, I want to thank Senator Bayh, the leadership of South Bend, and TRANSPO, for leading the way for our entire country. It's impossible to overstate the symbolism of this event. South Bend is going to build the nation's most environmentally-friendly transit facility right on top of a former Brownfields site. You are building an environmentally-friendly facility on property that was once an environmental hazard.

This effort may be symbolic for the nation, but it is more than just symbolism for the folks here in South Bend. In South Bend, this effort means bricks, and mortar, and most importantly, jobs for hundreds of families that need them right now.

That is what this Recovery Act and this groundbreaking is all about. It's about efforts that put people back to work and projects that improve the quality of life for all of us.

Now, in this brief speech I have given, I have thanked you on behalf of myself, on behalf of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, and on behalf of President Obama. But there is one more thank you I need to express. It is from a person who matters more to me than all those other people combined.

I want to thank South Bend for their leadership on behalf of my wife. My wife is a proud graduate of Indiana University South Bend (IUSB).

Today, she serves as Legislative Director for the Majority Whip of the United States Senate. But long ago, her very first job in public policy – the job that gave her the bug to work in politics – was working for the then-Mayor of South Bend. She would leave South Bend for Washington, where she would gain a Master's Degree at Georgetown and work as public policy advisor to many different communities. Those communities included the City of South Bend and its TRANSPO transit system.

That was many years ago, but back when she was working with TRANSPO, my wife had the opportunity to work with Lucky Reznick. So she was especially pleased when I told her that this facility would be named in his honor.

My wife is a daughter of this community. So while I can say, as President Obama's Federal Transit Administrator, that the nation is proud of South Bend's leadership, what matters even more in our house is that my wife is so proud of what her own community has done.

Thank you very much for having me today. And congratulations to everyone that made this great accomplishment possible.

Administrator Peter Rogoff Delivers Remarks at APTA Annual Meeting - Orlando, FL

10-06-09

Remarks: Administrator Peter Rogoff

APTA Annual Meeting
Orlando, Florida

Before I begin, I wanted to take a moment to congratulate Dr. Bev Scott. This has been a challenging year for the MARTA - just as it has been challenging for so many transit agencies across the country. Even with all those challenges, Dr. Scott found the time to be a true leader for all of us.

I was very grateful for her participation on behalf of APTA in our stakeholders meeting on transit safety. And I was thrilled that her tenure as APTA chairman could culminate in the winning of the largest single TIGGER grant of the 43 grants we awarded under that extremely competitive $100 million program.

I also want to congratulate Mattie Carter. We learned yesterday in her address that APTA will continue under strong and passionate leadership under Mattie Carter. This is a great milestone for Ms. Carter as well as a milestone for all of transit in Memphis. I look forward to her leadership in the year to come.

I also want to thank APTA, especially Bill Millar and his staff, for extending such a warm welcome to Secretary Ray LaHood yesterday. We truly have a great friend and advocate for transit in Secretary LaHood. He has been a great partner when it has come to telling America all that we are accomplishing under the Recovery Act.

When you want to evaluate the Obama Administration's commitment to public transportation, you don't have to look any farther than the Recovery Act. Our agency was granted an 80 percent increase to our budget in that bill. That's a far higher increase than was given to any other mode of transportation and perhaps any other Federal agency funded under the Recovery Act. The only exception was the new $8 billion investment in high speed rail - yet another investment in public transportation.

I will admit that when I first took the reigns of the FTA at the end of May there was deep nervousness throughout the agency of our ability to meet our 50 percent obligation goal by September 1st. The fact that we reached 90 percent obligation by that September 1st deadline is a testament to the extraordinary hard work of the FTA staff both in headquarters and regions and the hard work of all of our transit grantees at making things happen.

At a time when Congress is revaluating our entire Federal investment in surface transportation and how we will pay for it, it is essential that we show continued progress with the Recovery Act. It is not enough that we just obligate dollars. Our charge is to put people to work - to get those dollars disbursed in an immediate productive way.

That obligation deadline was a milestone for the FTA. It was a huge challenge to surge 80 percent in a single year. Some in the FTA staff are appropriately hoping that they can now take a breath. But I have had to tell them - there will be no breath. There is too much to do. The President expects more of the FTA than any prior president since Lyndon Johnson. And we will fulfill those expectations. The FTA will continue to lean forward. In everything we do.

I know it's not often that FTA administrators quote philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard, but Kierkegaard did say that, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." I plan to see to it that the FTA continues to lean forward in the years to come. I need the transit industry to lean forward with me. Now is the time to lean forward because we have a President who sees public transportation as being at the very center of his vision for a more prosperous future and a more livable America.

My staff has told me that we at the FTA have responded to more inquiries and provided more information that comes directly from the White House in President Obama's first nine months in office than we have provided in the last eight years. For us at the FTA, this White House is "high maintenance" – and we expect it to stay that way.

Within just a few months of taking office, President Obama told the nation that: "global climate change and our reliance on foreign oil have … created tremendous national security challenges. To solve these problems and create new economic opportunities we must make our transportation system cleaner and more efficient."

The Vice President of the United States just a few weeks ago stated that, "all over the country, resources are being put to work not only creating jobs now but also investing in the future. A future that strengthens our transit system, makes us more energy efficient, and increases safety."

Continually, we hear voicings from the President and the Vice President that go directly to the heart of our mission and your mission. We hear them, seemingly, every other week.

I'll tell you a small confession, even though we provide an unprecedented amount of material to the White House on these issues, we still don't know who is writing all this stuff. We don't need to know. We just need to soak it in and keep leaning forward.

And it's not just the White House that is concerned about greenhouse gas emissions or congestion relief or the need to reduce our dependence on

foreign oil. The new majorities in Congress are speaking with an equally strong voice. No longer is public transportation just viewed as an appropriate solution if it can be done cheaply enough. Our enterprise is viewed as worthy in and of itself. That's why it's time to lean forward.

Yesterday, I told you that Secretary LaHood is making sure that FTA always has a full seat at the table when it comes to the debate over our transportation challenges. We all know that wasn't always the case.

For so many years we were expected to be the lesser cousin when it came to surface transportation – the runt of the litter. We were told to keep our expectations low because we required a public subsidy. We were told to not compare ourselves to highway investments because highway investments paid for themselves through the Highway Trust Fund while transit investments needed a combination of funds from the Trust Fund and the General Fund.

Well I have news for those of you that have been busy operating transit systems and not focusing on the debate in Washington of recent. That paradigm is now dead. It's been dead for well over a year when the Highway Trust Fund first had to be bailed out with an $8 billion infusion of General Fund revenues. The only thing that's happened since then is that Congress was required to put billions more in General Fund revenues into the Highway Trust Fund to keep our highway investments flowing.

And mark my words, before all the debate is done on the financing of highways and transit systems in the future, there will be yet more General Fund transfers into the Highway Trust Fund to keep the Trust Fund afloat.

My purpose here is not to revel in the problems facing the highway program – I would like nothing more than to see the highway program get back on a firm footing. Let's remember the Federal aid highway program continues to flex over a billion dollars a year to public transit. In fact, just from the Recovery Act, we're expecting to see roughly $300 million in highway funds flexed over for transit. And the reality is that the Mass Transit Account of the Trust Fund isn't in good shape either. We may get through this fiscal year, but we won't get very far into the next fiscal year before we too will need an infusion of cash.

My point in raising this is to remind everyone that we are all in the same lifeboat - highways and transit together. Everything is up for grabs, including the Federal financing of our enterprise. Which is why we all must lean forward and explain that yes, our enterprise provides all those benefits you want, and yes, it requires subsidies to do it. Just like highways. We need to lean forward and make this case without apology.

How are we at the FTA leaning forward? We are being aggressive in articulating how transit fits into our broader agenda and how transit has to fit into future Federal budgets.

We are aggressively tackling changes to the New Starts decision process. That has been a core focus this month as we prepare to recommend a streamlined process to the Secretary. We currently have a process that is unnecessarily complicated, frustrating, lengthy, and positively incomprehensible to the public, the Congress, most of the transit community, and even senior managers at the FTA.

As I'm sometimes required to remind my staff – we are not charged with curing cancer here. We are deciding whether to invest some money into laying some rail or buying some paint to make an existing street lane into a designated bus lane.

We must stop our constant pursuit of a process that may be incrementally more perfect. Instead, we need a process that is faster; more understandable and defensible to the Members of Congress; and the taxpayers that are actually paying for these projects.

You should note that I didn't say that we are working on improving our New Starts "approval process." I said we were working on improving our New Starts "decision process." Note that I didn't say that the goal was a faster approval. I said it was about a faster decision.

Inevitably a streamlined process, for some projects, means an expedited decision that the Federal Government will not participate. And when we know we are not going to participate, we are not going to pretend otherwise.

I want to be clear. This administration wants more transit options for more people. We are leaning forward. The goal is a process that provides a faster path to a decision, a process that is understandable, and a process that better ensures that we get the investment at a price and on a timetable that is honest and realistic. We are not retooling our processes so that the FTA will participate in every twinkle of every mayor's eye.

No question that we need a vastly improved process. But I must also point out that periodically the FTA has gotten a bum rap on the time it takes to get a project approved. There are plenty of examples where projects sat in the pipeline for years. They sat there because they didn't have any local match. In some cases, they endured one or two terms when the mayor or the city counsel or the state legislature was hostile to the project. That certainly wasn't the fault of the FTA. But then, when they finally work through all that, they like to blame the FTA for all the years it took to bring the project to construction.

Part of our new process will mean that we won't dance for years and years with projects that are making no progress because of local circumstances. Under our streamlined approach, we are going to end our involvement with that project and focus our staff resources on getting the projects that can be approved to the finish line. FTA will be focusing our efforts on

getting projects built. FTA will not be focusing our efforts on a process designed to maximize consulting fees paid by projects that will never get built.

That said, FTA will also be leaning forward on helping transit projects obtain that local match. One of the things that I have been struck by as I travel around the country is the strength of the business community in either helping or hurting a project that is seeking to get built.

We have wonderful examples where businesses have seen the benefits that will come to them and have agreed to tax themselves to make the project happen. We have other examples where businesses have been singularly focused on avoiding those taxes or avoiding the disruption that comes with the construction phase.

I intend to stand up an informal voluntary group of business leaders from around the country that will serve as ambassadors for transit. The kind of business leaders that can convince skeptical businesspeople in other communities that transit is in the interest of their bottom line. There will be more announcements on this soon.

We will be leaning forward on safety. As you heard Secretary LaHood say yesterday, we are determined to close the gap that has been known for years. We also will be focusing on the State of Good Repair (SGR) of our transit agencies. Those two issues – safety and the SGR – are inextricably linked. We are a safe industry. That has to be remembered.

But we need to lean forward on safety because even our newer systems are aging. Because this administration wants more transit service and more transit options, we must also ensure that transit is perceived by all as safe. We must focus on ensuring that a safe industry stays safe, and keeping catastrophic accidents from pushing passengers back onto the highways.

Our goal is to help agencies steadily raise their standards of safety and accurately identify their risks. APTA has done a great service on developing voluntary standards. Together, we can do more.

The science of effective SMSs has come a very long way. By strengthening our partnerships with State Safety Oversight and bringing resources to the

efforts, we can lean forward and guarantee that a safe industry stays safe, even as it ages.

For all the talk on New Starts, we need to remember that the vast majority of our enterprise doesn't run rail service and doesn't plan to in the near future. We need to stay focused on the safety of our bus operators.

I am pleased that today, FTA launched a new website designed to help rural and small urban transit providers build and implement effective safety, security and emergency preparedness programs.

What does this website mean to the thousands of rural and small urban transit providers across the Nation? It means having quick and easy access to practical and relevant information resources. It means having a tool to help you assess your program's strengths and weaknesses. It means having the ability to ask questions and receive answers from peers on critical safety matters. The site will give users quick and easy access to a comprehensive resource library that houses over 1,000 technical assistance documents.

Identifying safety as our number one priority is not just about rhetoric. As Secretary LaHood stated, we plan to lean forward in this area in ways that we never have before.

That is just a few ways by which FTA is leaning forward. I need you to lean forward with me. We need to maintain the outstanding partnership that FTA and APTA has had over the years.

Anyone who has had to push a car out of a ditch knows that if two people are pushing, but not in the same direction and not at the same time, you don't get very far. But if you lean forward and push forward, in the same direction and simultaneously, you get the car out of the ditch.

We are in a period of extraordinary opportunity for public transportation. Let's not miss this opportunity. Let's lean forward, push, in the same direction, together and simultaneously. If we do, we will accomplish great things.

Thank you.

Administrator Rogoff Delivers Remarks at Grand Rapids Groundbreaking - Grand Rapids, MI

12-18-09

Mayor Heartwell and guests, on behalf of President Barack Obama and U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, I would like to congratulate you.

I came to Grand Rapids because the renovation and expansion of this bus facility embodies so much of what President Obama is working to achieve with the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.

First and foremost, it will create 50 jobs right now. That's 50 families that don't need to fret where the rent is coming from and don't need to worry where the food money is coming from. That's 50 families making car payments and having the money to buy school clothes.

This project, just like the Recovery Act itself, is about more than just creating jobs. It's about putting people to work on projects that improve the lives of a great many more citizens.

The Rapid is a great resource for Grand Rapids and the surrounding cities. It provides mobility for everyone – to work, to school, to church, to shopping. It helps folks pay less for gasoline. It helps families with two workers get along with just one car.

This is a transit service that is growing. Ridership has more than doubled in just 10 years with more than 8 million trips made just last year – the highest number ever.

It's an incredible success story, and this new facility is helping the Rapid handle that growth. It will not just accommodate the extra buses that the Rapid has already put on the road, but it will be large enough to accommodate growth for decades to come.

Like I said, this project is about more than just creating jobs; it's about improving the quality of life for everyone.

I also came to Grand Rapids to witness the leadership this community demonstrates when it comes to green buildings.

Cities like New York and San Francisco like to pat themselves on the back for their dedication and accomplishments relating to environmentally-friendly work. But the reality is that nearly one out of every five Green buildings in the entire United States is right here in Grand Rapids.

Bus facilities can be dirty places. But through the leadership here at the Rapid, you are finding a way to build this facility to achieve LEED silver certification.

You know, when I told some of my colleagues that I was coming to dedicate a LEED silver certified bus garage, one of them commented – "that's not just hugging the trees, that's chewing on the bark."

You know, the whole issue of deploying green buildings is really starting to catch on across the country. People are realizing that it's not just about leaving our children with a cleaner environment; it's about lowering the burden of taxpayers to pay the energy costs and heating cost of these buildings.

That may be a new concept in America, but it's certainly not a new concept in Grand Rapids. This community has led the way - and this new facility is just one more example.

Public transportation is also at the center of President Obama's efforts to lower our dependence on foreign oil.

When it comes to the Obama Administration showing its commitment to people that ride the bus, you don't have to look any farther than the Recovery Act.

When I was first appointed by the President, and then confirmed by the Senate, we were facing a crisis in my agency. The President had just delivered an 80 percent boost in funding, but putting that money to work was subject to a very tight deadline. We had to have each and every grantee obligate at least half their money by September 1, 2009.

When I first walked into the building, we worried about our ability to meet that goal.

Our worries were misplaced. As we began to really work with agencies like the Rapid, we found that there were plenty of opportunities to put that money to work right away – and create jobs right away. That engine is still running, and it's creating more jobs.

By the time September 1st rolled around, we weren't 50 percent obligated – we were more like 80 percent obligated. And now, we are more than 90 percent obligated.

For this project, my agency has committed more than $20 million. And almost $12 million of that money came directly from the Recovery Act.

We are going to get this facility built two years ahead of schedule.

That means more jobs now. That means getting the job done at a lower cost to the taxpayer. That means improving the quality of life sooner for the entire Grand Rapids community.

And that is what President Obama’s Recovery Act is all about.

Thank you for letting me be part of this celebration.